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Business Students at University: Are They Trained to Cheat?

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ABSTRACT

Over decades, we have been bombarded with an increased of corporate scandals involving allegations of unethical behaviours mostly against accounting fraud. The debacles left us to ponder whether the education system implemented at university levels and education modules have taught students to be corrupted rather than acted responsibly and ethically. This study centres on business students at one of the private higher learning institutions in Malaysia. Surprisingly, the finding indicates that majority of students has cheated throughout their period of study. The research discovers that students' cheating behaviour is influenced by their beliefs; on what constitutes cheating and the perception that cheating has become a common behaviour among other students. In addition, gender, academic performance (i.e. grade point average) and area of specialization have also significantly influenced on academic dishonesty. The results of the study illustrate that strict monitoring and fear of being prosecuted may reduce the tendency of cheating. Seeing that this situation has reached at an alarming stage, thus, the study has recommended some guidelines to the universities for its implementation. It is believed that by enhancing academic code of conducts, incorporating ethics components in subjects taught and establishing ethical community-building among students are advantageous to inculcate a sense of responsibility towards ethical behaviour and organise rigorous campaigns to promote integrity as way of life.

Keywords: *ethics, students, academic misconduct, beliefs, behaviours, cheating*

Introduction

Ethical values provide a foundation to which a civilised society exists (Smith, 2003). Social standing aside, ethical values should be embedded in all individuals with no exception. Ethical values are your pillars when given responsibilities of safeguarding interests of corporations in a professional capacity. Dr. Ron Bucknam, former applied ethics program director of Texas Tech. University (1998), recommends that professional practices involve the following ethical values: integrity, honesty, trustworthiness, charity, responsibility and self-discipline. Nonetheless, deterioration of ethical values is evident in the overwhelming white collar crimes reported over the decade.

The highly publicised corporate scandals heightened the attention given to ethical conducts by professional practices, which ultimately drove us back to the university years where all these began; cheating during tests and exams, copying a friend's assignment and plagiarising thesis among students. All of these are considered as academic dishonesty. Academic dishonesty throughout university lifetime study could or could not ultimately continue to ethical misconduct at the workplace. Even so, the implication is highly significant. Studies have found that students who committed into the acts of academic dishonesty in university were more likely to engage in ethical misconducts at the workplace (Sims, 1993; Nonis and Swift, 2001). These findings are very alarming and should not be taken lightly.

From the view of growing concern of academic dishonesty among business students, this study focuses on the three area of interest. First, it aims to gauge students' beliefs on what constitutes cheating and how the beliefs influence their cheating behaviours. The second aim is to provide an analysis of students' inclination to cheating because everyone is doing it or also known as false consensus effect. Finally, this study examines the relationships between cheating score and students' inclination to cheating with students' individual factors. The study also hopes to provide measures universities can adopt to reduce students' unethical conducts. Therefore, in order to accomplish these objectives, a questionnaire survey was administered to business students at undergraduate level in a private institution of higher learning in Malaysia.

The paper is structured as follows: review of literature on academic dishonesty and factors influencing academic dishonesty; research methodology; research findings based on the questionnaire survey; and conclusions and recommendations.

Literature Review and Hypotheses

Academic Dishonesty: How Serious Is the Problem?

The issue of academic integrity has long been the subject of discussions, debates and studies among the scholars and academicians in the respective fields. The corporate scandals and malfeasances trigger increased concern on the aspects of integrity and ethics in all industries including the education sector. Academic dishonesty is a major challenge especially at the college and university level which includes cheating during examination, plagiarism, allowing others to copy answers or assignments and facilitating others to cheat.

Previous studies have shown the alarming facts regarding the erosion of academic integrity among the students. Ogilby (1995) reports that from 1940 to 1982, the cheating incidents among college students had increased from 23 % to 84 % (Rakovski & Levy, 2007). The increasing trend had also proven through the three studies conducted by Schab in 1969, 1979 and 1989, where the self-reported cheating among the students were 33 %, 60 % and 67 % respectively (Al-Qaisy, 2008). In addition, Batory and Batory (2008) have carried out a research among the undergraduate students majoring in business study at four universities. Unexpectedly, the result indicates that 51 % respondents have admitted involve into the academic dishonesty during the past years.

According to a study by Rakovski and Levi (2007), more than 60 % of their respondents revealed that they had allowed others to copy homework and gave or received help on graded assignments. A higher rate of cheating was found from a survey of undergraduate students by Kidwell, Wozniak and Laurel (2003). Based on 17 cheating behaviours listed on the survey, 74.5 % of the respondents confessed that they had engaged more than once in any of those behaviours. A similar cheating rate was obtained by Chapman, Davis, Toy and Wright (2004) whereby 74.9 % of business undergraduates and graduates students have cheated by several ways. In addition, nearly 11 % of the students classified themselves as cheating a lot.

Another intriguing finding pertaining to academic dishonesty is the higher occurrence of cheating among business students compared to other programs. Caruana, Ramaseshan & Ewing (2000) report that business students have the highest cheating rate of 87 % as compared to engineering, science and humanities students (Ravoski & Levy, 2007). A similar finding had also reported by McCabe (2005), Smyth and Davis (2004) and Clement

(2001). Bernardi, Metzger, Bruno, Hoogkamp, Reyes and Barnaby (2004) who found that business students tend to score lower grade on the measurement of moral development and moral reasoning test and thus, it could be a plausible explanation to the high rate of cheating among the students as compared to other students from other disciplines. These findings have certainly elevated a sense of anxiousness among the business community and the public at large as the unethical and dishonest practitioners can cause numerous disadvantages to the organizations they are working for. Furthermore, a study by Bernardi *et al.* (2004) had also presumed that the cheating behaviour during the high school and college has the tendency to be continuously practiced into other environments and situations. Thus, concerted focus, efforts and actions should be taken seriously in managing the issue of academic dishonesty.

Factors Influencing Academic Dishonesty

Numerous factors have been significantly linked to the cheating behaviour among students such as situational and individual factors. By utilizing a large classroom or examination hall for the examination purpose, less monitoring by the lecturer or invigilator during the examination period as well as an increased use of technology is believed to be part of the situational factors that has decayed the academic integrity and encouraged cheating behaviour. It is explainable that students who have a low opinion towards the integrity culture at their school are more likely to involve in cheating (Kisamore, Stone & Jawahar, 2007), and on the other hand, students who believe that their lecturers are concerned and actively involved in the learning process are less likely to cheat (Al-Qaisy, 2008). In this context, Copeland (2005) asserts that though the universities can influence the ethical behaviour and development of moral among students, but the decision whether or not to be an ethical practitioner is in their hands. Regarding the use of technology, a study by Scanlon and Neumann (2002) reveals that a considerable number of students admitted that the use of internet has increased the tendency of plagiarism; by copying and pasting text into their papers without an acknowledgement of the original author and proper citation. Besides, students are also smart enough to insert some useful formulas and information into calculators and watches for the examination purpose (Rakovski & Levy, 2007). The use of technology has certainly expedited the process of cheating among the students. Regardless of the strict warning imposed, the opportunity to

perform their assignments in group will increase the tendency of cheating behaviour by sharing the information among them.

Apart from the situational reason, an individual factor such as the perception that cheating is acceptable and everyone is doing it has significantly encouraged the academic dishonesty. This false consensus effect can be described as “the perception of students to identify their own behaviour as relatively typical within the overall population” (Batory & Batory, 2008, p.106). According to a study conducted by Smyth and Davis (2004) on 265 college students, it has indicated that 45 % of the samples considered cheating as an acceptable social behaviour despite the fact that 92 % of them believed it is unethical. In addition, Chapman *et al.* (2004) in his research has developed an index of comparison between the self-admitted cheating behaviour and perception of others’ cheating behaviour. They found that the students perceived the frequency of cheating of other students is four times greater than their own behaviours.

Moreover, the demographical background of students as such age, gender, academic achievement and area of specialization has also provided some explanation to the cheating behaviour. The result of an online survey participated by 380 respondents at one of the Jordan universities has signified that there are differences between gender and the cheating trend; male students are found to commit more into cheating behaviour both in examinations and assignments than females (Al-Qaisy, 2008). The above judgement has also strengthened with a study conducted by Rakovski and Levy (2007), McCabe, Trevino and Butterfield (2001), Whitley, Nelson and Jones (1999) and Crown and Spiller (1998). The finding is closely related to the result from meta-analyses conducted by Borkowski and Ugras (1998); women seem to demonstrate more ethical attitudes than men.

It is believed that a high expectation and self-pressure to improve academic performance by increasing the grade point average (GPA) has elevated the likelihood of cheating behaviour among students. In contrast, a study consisted of 1,255 business students at one of the colleges has signified a different scenario whereby students with higher GPA had less tendency to involve in academic dishonesty (Rakovski & Levy, 2007). Considering the faculty or disciplines of study, a research conducted had proven that students in educational sciences, arts, administrative and finance have higher tendency to cheat as compared to the science and engineering students (Al-Qaisy, 2008). As for further discussion, Chapman *et al.* (2004) had carried out an in-depth research concerned to the

students from the faculty of business studies. Yet, the result had surprisingly identified that students with the specialization of marketing had higher inclination towards cheating behaviour as compared to students from other areas of specialization of the business studies (5.35 versus 3.50). In addition,

Rakovski and Levy (2007) indicated that the students who are majoring in management found to be more dishonest as compared to the accounting students who tend to be more honest and trustworthy. However, a meta-analyses conducted by Borkowski and Ugras (1998) has proved that there was no relationship between the area of specialization and ethics of the students pertaining the cheating behaviour.

A current study has addressed some of the contributively factors influencing on the academic dishonesty namely students' belief; on what constitutes cheating, false consensus effect and students' individual variables such as gender, area of specialization, year of study, exposure to ethics/law courses and GPA.

For the purpose of this study, there are four hypothetical statements have been developed:

- H₁: Students' cheating behaviour is associated with their beliefs whether or not an action is considered as cheating.
- H₂: Students' cheating behaviour is associated with their perceptions of others' cheating behaviour.
- H₃: There is a difference in cheating score across gender, major, year of study, exposure to ethics/law courses and GPA.
- H₄: There is a difference in inclination to cheating across gender, major, year of study, exposure to ethics/law courses and GPA.

Methodology

A numbers of questionnaire surveys were disseminated to respondents for the purpose of data collection. The four-page of questionnaire was adapted from an exploratory research by Chapman, Davis, Toy and Wright (2004), which was based on works of Allen, Fuller and Luckett (1998) and Nonis and Swift (1998). The set of questionnaire consisted of four parts; the Part I was basically required the respondents to complete on their demographical profiles; gender and age.

While in the part II of the questionnaire, the respondents were presented with seven different situations involving cheating behaviors as

such: 1. A student using the previous examination question which was stolen from earlier course for the present class; 2. A student is purposely swiped the examination question out from the examination hall though it is strictly prohibited; 3. A group of students were cheating among themselves during the online examination, though they had explicitly told the administer that it was performed individually; 4. The students using notes or similar materials during the closed-book assessments, 5. The students had altered some of the answers in the assignments and given credits for the alteration; 6. A student on purpose has allowed the others to copy his answers during examination; 7. A student sought for information from other students who had already sat for the examination on a earlier date. Based on the situations provided, respondents were required to analyze the followings:

- i. whether or not the situation is considered as cheating (*i.e.* students' belief)
- ii. whether or not they involve in such behaviour (*i.e.* students cheating behaviour)
- iii. their perceptions whether other students involve in such behaviour.

As for the Part III, the questionnaire surveys had been further developed while the respondents were given four different scenarios to be analyzed. The first situation was about how far or up to what extent one could provide an assistant to a friend or acquaintance during their examinations. The second circumstance was concerned on one's cheating intention when a copy of the examination question was asked from a student who had already sat for the examination. The third scenario was focused on an individual electronic assessment; this type of examination had offered more opportunities for the students to copy the answers from others as the information can be rapidly and easily disseminated. The fourth scenario is seen to be similar with the third, however, at this stage, a strict warning was imposed by the instructor that students who were caught or attempted to cheat through an electronic surveillance will be punished accordingly. In this section, the respondents were given three alternatives as the answers: whether to cooperate with others to score better grades, to decline the offer or to decline and report the incident to the instructor. The final part of the questionnaire surveys, Part IV holds a series of statements about cheating behaviour, and the respondents were required to answer by using the range of Likert scale provided (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree). There are six statements which

has encompassed one's inclination towards cheating behaviour as such; cheating is ok- it reflects the real world; not cheating is an academic disadvantage; students have a right to do whatever it takes to pass a course; the workload is so intense that students must cheat to survive; you must cheat to score higher GPA, and thus significant to get a good job or go to graduate school; and cheating is just an easier way to obtain better grades without pressure and attention towards study. Furthermore, three more questions were added into this section significantly to seek the respondents' opinions on the possible steps to be taken in order to reduce the tendency of cheating.

Identification of Sampling Frame, Questionnaire Distribution and Collection

The respondents of this research were basically drawn from the undergraduates Business students; from the first to the fourth year of study. They have enrolled under various Honours degree programmes; namely Bachelor of Accounting (B. Acc.), Bachelor of Finance (B. Fin.) and Bachelor of Business Administration, specializing in Human Resource (BBA HR), Bachelor of Marketing (BBA Mktg) and Bachelor of Entrepreneur Development (BBA ED). In addition, it is worth to be noted that the duration allocated for the full time study to all above-mentioned courses is 3 years, however, the B.Acc programme could take up to 4 years. Prior to the distribution of questionnaire surveys to the selected respondents, the pilot test was effectively applied. The test had involved approximately of 40 students from the second year of study and majority of them are well-exposed to the development of questionnaire surveys. In general, all feedbacks received were appropriately incorporated.

The questionnaires were distributed in-class with the assistance of lecturers from various courses to ensure that the sample of respondents comprises of all undergraduate courses and to ensure high response rate. The number of questionnaires collected was 331, representing 31 percent of the undergraduate population at the Business campus. This amount fulfils the sample size based on a population size of 1805 undergraduate students taking Business courses, as recommended by Raosoft, Inc. (available at www.raosoft.com/samplesize.html?ot_1)

Statistical Methods

A number of techniques were effectively used in this study included the descriptive statistics, chi-square test of independence and analysis of variance (ANOVA). The first two hypotheses were tested by using the chi-square test method while one way analysis of variance was applied to investigate on the third and the fourth hypotheses.

Discussion

The research sample was participated by 30 % of male and 70 % of female students; having the majority of 43 % participants from the programme of B. Acc. Across the respondents, 17 % of them were found to have never been exposed to the Business Law or Business Ethics modules throughout their period of study. Table 1 depicts the distribution of respondents based on the courses and year of study.

Table 1: Distribution of Respondents

	Frequency	Percentage	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3	Year 4
B. Acc	141	42.6	45.4 %	7.8 %	23.4 %	23.4 %
B. Fin	26	7.9	7.7 %	80.8 %	11.5 %	.0 %
BBA Mktg	77	23.3	29.9 %	33.8 %	36.4 %	.0 %
BBA ED	16	4.8	43.8 %	56.2 %	.0 %	.0 %
BBA HR	71	21.5	40.0 %	30.0 %	30.0 %	.0 %
Total	331	100.0				

Students' Cheating Behaviour and Their Beliefs

In order to examine whether or not the students' cheating behaviour is influenced by their belief and considered as cheating, a chi-square test of independence was used effectively. For the purpose of analysis, both variables were used based on the seven cheating situations which had already been mentioned in the Part II. The findings are depicted in Table 2.

Throughout the research, the result has indicated that students are generally having different views on what constitute cheating behaviour. A total observation over 2,232 respondents has signified that 74.1 % of them agreed that all of the seven situations represent cheating. However,

Table 2: Cross Tabulation of Students' Cheating Behaviour and Their Belief

		Belief		
		Cheating	Not cheating	Total
Cheating behaviour	Cheating	691	365	1056
	Not cheating	963	213	1176
	Total	1654	578	2232

the remaining of 25.9 % does not regard the situations as cheating (despite the fact that all of the situations given contained some elements of cheating). This fallacy is perceived as one of the factors that have encouraged students to involve in cheating. In other words, the students believe that their misconduct as justifiable and ethical. The finding had further been testified by using the chi-square test method on purpose to examine the significant of correlation ship between the students' belief and their tendency of cheating ($p < 0.001$). However, the result found that the students who believe such behaviour as ethical would have 2.4 times more likely to cheat as compared to those who perceive the action as unethical.

Students' Cheating Behaviour and False Consensus Effect

Apart from an individual behaviour, having perception that other students are involved in cheating has also become a contributing factor to their own academic misconducts. This scenario was hypothesized into this research by perceiving other students' cheating behaviour as acceptable. Table 3 presents the cross tabulation on the perception of respondents' cheating behaviour which had been measured based on the seven cheating situations mentioned in the previous section.

Based on the total observation over 2,229 respondents, 47.4 % of them admitted that they have involved in cheating during their academic year of study. However, this is based on the assumption that other students were also having the same behaviour by 83.8 % of the total respondents. Thus, these figures have validated the false consensus effect. The results obtained from the chi-square test has further revealed that there is in fact a significant relationship between students' perception of others' cheating behaviour and whether or not they can cheat ($p < 0.001$). Based on the odd ratio, it has signifies that students who believe that other

Table 3: Cross Tabulation of Students' Perceptions Towards Cheating Behaviour

		Others		
		Cheating	Not cheating	Total
Self	Cheating	998	58	1056
	Not cheating	871	302	1173
	Total	1869	360	2229

students are also engaged in cheating are 6 times more likely to cheat than those who have no such perception.

Analysis on the Cheating Score and Its Relationships with Students' Individual Factors

It is essential to determine the gravity of academic dishonesty among the undergraduate business students. A cheating scores which is referring to the Part II and Part III of the survey contained several elements of cheating. The cheating score is ranged within 0 to 15, with 0 representing no element of cheating at all in any situation and 15 representing the cheating behaviour in all situations. It was found that 95 % of the respondents scored at least 1/15 based on the 15 situations. 94 % of the male respondents and 96 % of the female respondents have cheating scores of 1 to 15. 17 % of the respondents who scored at least 1/15 have not been exposed to law and/ or ethics subjects, with 38 % of them coming from first year study. It is also disturbing to discover that 65 % of the respondents with grade point average (GPA) of more than 3.0 scored at least 1/15 in the cheating frequency score.

An analysis of variance (ANOVA) type of test was effectively used to investigate if the cheating score are varies across gender, area of specialization, year of study, exposure to the ethics/law courses and GPA (hypothesis 3). By gender, the results has indicated that there are significant differences in cheating behaviour between the male and female students ($F = 3.448$; $p < 0.10$); as the male students have higher tendency of cheating frequency than female (7.12 versus 6.29). Significant differences were also found across the five areas of specialization ($F = 3.022$; $p < 0.05$). Students who are enrolled in B.Acc scored lowest mean of cheating frequency (5.78) while B.Fin students have the highest mean of 7.50. However, other variables do not produce any significant results.

Students' Inclination Towards Cheating and Its Relationships with Students' Individual Factors

To have a better understanding on the academic dishonesty among business students, a current study has examined the influence of students' individual factors towards their inclination to engage in cheating. The inclination to cheat was measured by calculating the responses in the six situations as mentioned in the Part IV, thus an increased in mean has simply delineated the tendency to cheat.

Based on the One Way Variance (ANOVA) method used; the result has indicated that the gender has produced significant correlation ($F = 9.952$; $p < 0.01$). This implies that there are significant differences with regards the inclination towards cheating between the male and female students. Accordingly, male students are more inclined to cheat, as evident in the previous studies (e.g. Rakovski and Levy, 2007; McCabe, Trevino and Butterfield, 2001; and Whitley, Nelson and Jones, 1999). Another variables with significant results refers to the academic performance; an increased of GPA ($F = 2.890$; $p < 0.10$). Significant differences exist among the students in terms of GPA; students who score more than 3.0 and those who scored lower than 3.0, has inclined the tendency to cheat respectively up to 2.85 and 3.01. Thus, our fourth hypothesis on the differences in cheating and its inclination across students' individual factors are strongly supported by gender and GPA.

Will Strict Monitoring and Penalties Reduce the Frequency of Cheatin'g (score)?

It is believable that there are various reasons have droved students towards cheating behaviour. Vague academic policies and the failure of monitoring during examinations are notably among the recognized factors. Accordingly, the respondents were asked whether or not stricter monitoring during examinations could reduce the cheating behaviour. The result has strongly signified that 57 % of the respondents agreed that stricter monitoring is an effective action in reducing the tendency of cheating among students. In fact, the results are also consistent with the finding from a study by Barnett and Dalton (1981); Nonis *et al.* (1998) and Smith, Davy, Rosenberg and Haight (2002); who found that stricter monitoring may reduce the opportunity of cheating. In addition, the respondents were also asked to give their opinions whether or not the instructors should aggressively apprehend and prosecute the cheaters.

Results has indicated that only 177 of the respondents (53 %) agreed that their instructors should apprehend and prosecute cheaters as this could definitely affect their academic performance and involvement throughout their years of study.

The research is also aimed at determining whether or not the students who commit into the cheating behaviour would have a fear if they were to be caught. Based on the result, it shows that only 51 % of the respondents believe that offenders will have the fear if their actions are exposed.

Conclusions and Recommendations

In short, it is worth to acknowledge that 95 % of the respondents believe at least by the ratio of 1:15 of the students have the tendency towards cheating behaviour. Primarily, the objective of this study is to analyze the leading factors which have contributed to the academic dishonesty. It is found that students seem to have a variety of views as to what constitutes cheating and they disregard the cheating as an academic misconduct if the intention is solely to offer assistance to a friend. In addition, the students' cheating behaviours is driven by the perceptions that others are also engaged in such action. These two factors, namely the students' erroneous belief that they are not cheating (when they actually are!) and perception that cheating is acceptable because everyone is doing it, has provided us with big clues in answering the question why is the academic dishonesty so prevalent among our students.

Considering the individual factor, three selected variables specifically the gender, area of specialization and GPA has generated significant correlations with the tendency towards cheating behaviour. Accordingly, the male students scored higher percentage in the inclination towards cheating as compared to the female counterpart. The finding is seen as equivalent to the study by Borkowski and Ugras (1998); women are more ethical than the men. However, hypothetically it is a nature of men who are more audacious and thus willing to take any risk as a way to excel in their undertakings.

Looking into the relationship between an inclination of cheating with the area of specialization, the study discovered that B.Acc students have a lower cheating score than the students who are majoring in Finance and Business Administration (B.Fin and BBA) It is predicted that the low cheating score in B.Acc students is partly due to the awareness through an inculcation in most of the subjects taught on the ethical values

and its legal implications against its misconducts practitioners. Therefore, this is seen as one of the significant factors which could reduce the tendency of cheating among the accounting students as a comparison to other students from other areas of specialization.

Apart from the gender and area of specialization, a poor academic performance has somehow 'force' the students to cheat; usually those with GPA less than 3.0 are more inclined to cheat rather than those who scored more than 3.0. Thus, the desperation to attain better grades has led the students into the academic dishonesty. Besides, a high rate of cheating among students requires effective detection and immediate preventive actions. This is due to the result found which has proven that weak monitoring system and inadequate enforcement to prosecute cheaters is perceived as one of the reasons of this continuous misconduct behaviour among students. It also implies that students have low expectations towards the university's efficiency in carrying out strict academic policy, especially with respect to the academic misconduct. According to Faucher (2009), a formal assessment serves as a preliminary evaluation which could determine the development of moral and if there is an inclination to cheat throughout their academic years of study. Therefore, it is a significant duty to be performed by the university and academicians in ensuring their students are well notified with regards to the policy of academic integrity and the repercussion against the misbehavers.

The study also recommends that an 'academic community' should be introduced as a way of promoting community-building to students; where the university empowers students to develop an academic community based on a high integrity (McCabe & Pavela, 2000). Furthermore, this strategic action also encourages the students to be responsible and ethical in fulfilling the imposed rules and regulations. This measure is believed to be a highly effective solution seeing the respondents will have higher inclination towards cheating as the others behave as such. For that reason, it is hoped that an establishment of 'academic community', with a stricter enforcement of rules and regulations as well as the influence of ethical and high morale of the peers will inculcate the honesty and integrity among students. Last but not least, it is presumed that the academic misbehavers should be dealt with accordingly; in a way that the punishment could be seriously affect their entire academic performance. The significance of holding integrity by the universities, academicians and students can be enhanced through

the organization of rigorous campaign; by displaying a high ethical code of conducts in all aspects of the students' activities.

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